



The Qualitative Report

Volume 19 | Number 50

Book Review 3

12-15-2014

Connecting the Dots: A Review of Norman K. Denzin's Interpretive Autoethnography

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Recommended APA Citation

Landu, V. (2014). Connecting the Dots: A Review of Norman K. Denzin's Interpretive Autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(50), 1-4. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol19/iss50/3>

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Abstract

The interpretive autoethnography by Denzin (2014) described the interpretive autoethnography as a biographical study of life experiences and performance of a person. Using exemplars, the author tried to connect the dots between lives, performance, the epiphany and its' interpretation. It also explained strategies to conducting interpretive autoethnography. The book defined several genealogies of terms which helped to broaden the understanding of the explanation of process and performance in autoethnography. The book presented some of the pitfalls to avoid when conducting interpretive autoethnography. Defining several genealogies of terms, the book explained process and performance in autoethnographic study.

Keywords

Interpretive Autoethnography, Process, Performance, Interpretive Inquiry

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Connecting the Dots: A Review of Norman K. Denzin's *Interpretive Autoethnography*

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The interpretive autoethnography by Denzin (2014) described the interpretive autoethnography as a biographical study of life experiences and performance of a person. Using exemplars, the author tried to connect the dots between lives, performance, the epiphany and its' interpretation. It also explained strategies to conducting interpretive autoethnography. The book defined several genealogies of terms which helped to broaden the understanding of the explanation of process and performance in autoethnography. The book presented some of the pitfalls to avoid when conducting interpretive autoethnography. Defining several genealogies of terms, the book explained process and performance in autoethnographic study. Keywords: Interpretive Autoethnography, Process, Performance, Interpretive Inquiry

My first notion about autoethnography emerged when I viewed my Nova Southeastern University email. I met the requirement for the award of my graduate certificate in July, 2013 and I emailed requesting for my certificate. While browsing through the latest information, I saw the winter course listed as "Autoethnography." This course was not part of the electives when I was in the Graduate Certificate Program which I completed six months earlier. My curiosity to understand what the course was about made me email one of my professor, Dr. Chenail who was also designated to teach the course. I inquired if I could register despite already completing the requirement for the award of the certificate and he affirmed I could. Though very eager to satisfy my curiosity, and knowledge, as a very busy person too, it was very difficult to make that decision. Brazing all odds, I went ahead and registered for the course. I thought to myself "I will gamble with this for the first few weeks and if am unable to continue due to my work schedule, I will withdraw." Having a great professor and learning so much about this method the first three weeks of the course, I continued to cope and here I am writing a book review on autoethnography.

Receiving the syllabus on January 7, 2014 raised the adrenalin in me. I always feel a great deal of excitement whenever I am about to learn anything new. The professor listed several articles for review and as I began to review those articles as well as the weekly collaborative sessions, I began to have a greater insight as to what autoethnography research was about. Attending the TQR conference organized by the Nova Southeastern University on January 17, 2014 provided the most eventful knowledge and information I needed to understand this method. The presentations on an ongoing autoethnographic study by three doctoral students as a panel discussion in the conference was so captivating and compelling. Each of the presentations was an evocative autoethnography. The use of prose, poetry, visual and performance was compelling. After this conference, I was determined to go through the course to learn more. The sixteen weeks class provided me an opportunity to understand the styles of autoethnography research.

The course syllabus indicates we should select a book for review. One of the books listed was the interpretive autoethnography by Denzin (2014). My attention was drawn to selecting this book because of the knowledge I had gained on interpretive phenomenology

during the course of the program as well as from articles reviewed. Hence, I was looking forward to understanding steps to conducting interpretive autoethnography.

Denzin (2014) in the beginning of the book expressed concern about challenges she feels autoethnography faces as a methodology when she stated “the challenge is to develop a methodology that allows us examine how the private troubles of individuals are connected to public issues and to public responses to these troubles” (p. vii). However, citing several authors who had written about different autoethnographic styles as in narrative, meta-autoethnography (e.g., Ellis, 2009); collaborative autoethnography (e.g., Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013), and several others, the author exclaimed the autoethnography as a method has evolved despite its’ critics. It’s acceptance as a methodology she explained, has led to the evolvement of several qualitative journal houses on qualitative inquiry as she concludes” in short interpretive first person texts have returned to the human discipline”(p. ix).

Denzin (2014) explained there has been a resurgence of interest in interpretive approaches to studying culture; hence, the author indicated it was time to chart a new course of turning a traditional life story into a critical, performative practice. The book started with the explanation of the assumptions of the interpretive method. It described interpretive autoethnography as “the life experiences and performance of a person” (p. 1). Using exemplars, the author connected the dots between lives, performance, the epiphany and its’ interpretation. The author maintained the interpretive social science scholars study real life flesh-and-blood people having real experiences in the social world. Hence, exclaiming “lives and their experiences, the telling and the told, are represented in stories which are performances” (p. 1).

Defining storied performance, Denzin (2014) citing Bochner and Riggs (2014) depicted that stories, as performances, usually follows certain conventions. These conventions are

- a) people who depicted as characters;
- b) the scene, place, or content where the story occurs;
- c) an epiphany or crisis that provides dramatic tension, around which the emplotted events depicted in the story revolve and toward which a resolution is pointed;
- d) temporal order of events;
- e) a point or moral to the story which gives meaning to the experiences depicted.

The author therefore explained situating your method in interpretive autoethnography and biographies requires conventions, which must be structured with respect to how life experiences are performed, told and written. The author finally pointed readers to some of the conventions usually taken for granted which needs to be avoided. These include existence of others; the influence and importance of race, gender, and class; the family beginning; turning points; known and knowing authors and observers; objective life markers; real persons with real life; turning point experiences, and truthful statements distinguished from fictions. Although the author explained what to avoid when conducting interpretive autoethnography, specific examples of how this can be employed requires more detail.

Denzin (2014) provided several definitions of autoethnography by several authors in order to explain the genealogy of terms. These terms include defining performance, performance writing, permativity/performative, ethnodrama, duoethnography, epiphanies, process and performance. With the interpretive study, Denzin explained studies should be organized as a biographically meaningful events, and that the epiphany-how the event is experienced, defined and woven through a person’s life should constitute the critical interpretive enquiry. It therefore explained the autoethnography is a re-telling and re-performing of life experiences as a result of a biographical meaningful event in a person’s life.

While the author provided several genealogies of terms and using exemplars, the author failed to indicate the specific style that this interpretive autoethnography is honed.

Of all the terms defined, the one that stood out to me as a reader was the explanation of process and performance in autoethnography. This is because I was able to reflect on the presentation I earlier indicated presented by three doctoral students in my introduction. I was able to understand the “process and performance” in an autoethnography study. The author described the process as that which examines the social form- the epiphany, while, the performance is the tale and the telling, which produces the performance texts. The author explained the four different ways in which an interpretive biographical material may be presented. It further explained the different ways in which writing about lived experience can come out right when conducting an autobiographical /autographic project study. Explaining the progressive –retrogressive method using the exemplar of watching performances and listening to alcoholics telling their life stories around a table, the author explained how the interpretive strategy was adopted using Thompson’s (1978) oral history material. The steps include: first collecting single-life story, secondly collecting self-stories organized around single terms and third, building an interpretive account of how long-term sobriety was performed. The author however emphasized that since stories are a significant part of autoethnography, and are subject to interpretations, concludes that interpretations can be biased.

Dwelling on the issue of credibility in an autoethnography study, Denzin (2014), explained performance autoethnographic texts poses a problem for a performance criterion with respect to how it should be critically analyzed relative to the epistemological, aesthetic and political criteria. It therefore identifies that setting criteria for performance autoethnography in an inquiry solely reflects the standpoint of the inquirer. The author describing, the seven criteria isolated by Bochner (2000) and five by Richardson (2000) for interpretive sufficiency, presented seven points that makes the autoethnographic performance texts valuable.

This book provided some insights as to the description of process and performance in autoethnography, what to avoid when conducting autobiographical study, the performance criteria and so on. However, the reason I chose to select this book for review was that, I was looking forward to a clear explanation of interpretive autoethnography methodology with respect to style, data collection analysis and presentation. The book did not provide a clear distinction of this. I hope this can be something that the author can present in future writings.

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Article Citation

Landu, V. (2014). Connecting the dots: A review of Norman K. Denzin's *Interpretive Autoethnography*. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(Review 18), 1-4. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/landu.pdf>
